



The Role of Feedback in Developing Reflective Competence

Krisztina LICHTENBERGER-MAJZIKNÉ, Andrea FISCHER

fischer.andrea@kre.hu, lichtenk@yahoo.com
(Károli Gáspár University, Budapest, Hungary)

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Abstract: *The role of feedback is unquestionably crucial in a teachers' profession. In our context of teacher education giving effective feedback is also an essential skill and tool of pedagogical evaluation for developmental purposes when educating university students and future teachers. Effective feedback fosters development, gives guidance, opens windows and new opportunities. In addition, the descriptive nature of feedback has a lot more potentials and positive effect on the teacher-student relationship than traditional assessment. In addition, giving and receiving feedback can be considered the starting point of reflection. Only by having looked into 'the mirror' first can one face reality, review and analyse an experience and learn from it. As a result, teaching effective feedback skills through experiential learning is a very important element in reflective teacher education. Taking all the above into consideration, a lot of emphasis is put on teaching effective feedback skills at our Centre for Teacher Education of Károli Gáspár University. Moreover, we aim at changing our students' perspectives in assessment practice through creating a more positive feedback culture. Giving and receiving feedback effectively can only be learnt by practice and reflecting on the experience. The ultimate aim is to develop our trainees' reflective competence which serves as a basis for their continuous professional development. Our paper first aims at interpreting feedback from a pedagogical point of view and presenting our best practice in the context of developing trainees' reflective competence. We shall also give details of everyday practice: how it is incorporated into the pedagogy, psychology and methodology seminars in preservice training. Finally, we shall discuss how and why developing feedback skills is also incorporated into our programme of school placement and mentor training.*

Keywords: reflective competence, teachers' training, development, teachers' profession

Feedback as a concept in psychology, pedagogy and teacher education

It is difficult to define what is meant by being a mature person or having a fully-fledged personality as the result and aim of an educational process. As it is not directly related to age, researchers and psychologists keep trying to define its criteria. According to *Allport*, "mature and healthy people continuously seek to identify with and participate in events outside themselves, are characterized by proactive behaviour" (Allport, 1980). In addition, *Berentés* (2012) lists the following traits when defining mature personality: realistic self-perception and reality perception, ability to differentiate between facts and opinion, realistic, positive self-image and the ability to self-evaluate (Berentés, 2012). These traits and abilities can be developed most effectively through feedback. In addition, mature people use these traits and skills to give and receive feedback. Thus, in our interpretation, giving and receiving effective feedback is a responsible, mature individual's crucial social skill and as such, its development is an educational and pedagogical task.

Besides its general-personal role, giving and receiving feedback is a substantial 21st century labour market skill. Employers are expected to give effective feedback while employees should use it proactively for dynamic self-development. Naturally, such feedback is effective only if it is timely, developmental and well-phrased with the right attitude.

However, the need or pressure for feedback is not only present in the job market on behalf of employers. Differences and tendencies among generations show that receiving frequent and almost immediate feedback is of utmost importance for the members of generation Y and Z (Tari, 2011). These so-called digital generations, or 'millennial kids' got used to being provided with immediate on-line feedback while the quality and quantity of those received 'likes' do not serve the purpose of their personal development needs. As a result, present day teenagers and 'twenteenagers' are hungry for personal, realistic, developmental feedback. Based on all the above, if giving and receiving feedback is a such key factor in success, the teaching and learning of these skills should be taken a lot more seriously both in public and higher education including the education of competent teachers who possess those necessary skills, knowledge and attitude of giving and receiving effective feedback.

Feedback in pedagogy, and didactics in particular, is usually interpreted as a concept related to evaluation and assessment. In theory, pedagogical evaluation is considered useful and effective if it accompanies the whole process of education with a comprehensive function. In addition to its general function, feedback in this field has got a number of specific functions (e.g. diagnostic, developmental, evaluative, selective) and aims such as increasing efficiency, giving information or determination of liability (Golnhofer, 2003). Giving feedback or reporting back can even have several different directions or aims: it may refer to the learner's knowledge changes, the teaching-learning process or the target system (Vidákovich, 1990; Báthory, 2000). On top of all, we strongly believe that feedback is also crucial in connection with class management and the teacher's personal effectiveness.

Despite all the above, it is our experience that in everyday rushed practice learners mostly receive *summative* feedback and selective evaluation in the form of grading only. There is very little room for giving and receiving formative feedback or assessment for *developmental* purposes.

In the hope of changing the attitude of evaluation and shifting the focus of assessment practice towards more *formative* purposes, a system of descriptive, text-based assessment was introduced instead of the traditional 1-5 scale of grades a few years ago in lower-primary public education in Hungary. In spite of all the efforts, however, the desired breakthrough and a fundamental attitudinal change in the practice of assessment never happened, perhaps due to the name of the programme. For example, a set of few-word descriptors were soon provided in the form of a 'sentence bank' to replace the grades. As a result, the desired comprehensive practice of giving personal, multi-criteria, formative feedback for developmental purposes failed to take root in state schools in Hungary (OECD, 2015a, 2015b).

The next step of reforming the assessment practice was to make formative assessment optional. It aimed at assessing the student's needs and development in the hope of setting up a tailor-made learning programme in order to support individual development. In so doing the process of development is put into the centre, self assessment, self-image and metacognition instead of the implementation of general educational objectives (Lénárd & Rapos, 2006; Bognár, 2006). Thus, although there is an available assessment model to implement the real role and function of feedback, it could not change the general practice and beliefs of educators except for the lower-primary teachers.

Taking reflective teacher education into consideration, there are further fundamental functions of feedback. The aims of teacher education are summarized by eight teacherly competences. However, reflective competence, which is the basis and precondition of active learning and developing all those eight competences, is not even mentioned among these. When breaking this basic competence further down into skills, knowledge and attitudes and considering its process of development, the crucial role of feedback as holding up a mirror is obvious. Referring back to our motto by the poet, Attila József, self-development in our subjective entity is almost impossible. Only external feedback may trigger self-reflection, show alternatives for development and thus enable one to become a teacher, pursue continuous professional and personal development (Fischer & Majzikné, 2017).

The aim of developing feedback skills in teacher education

Based on all the above mentioned pedagogical arguments we consider feedback to be of utmost importance for a number of reasons. Below we shall discuss the aims of developing the culture of giving feedback and giving the trainees practice in developing their feedback skills.

By the time teacher trainees enrol in higher education and start their university career, their personal development is not over yet. Based on our training experience the development of their social and emotional intelligence skills, are rather neglected in public education and thus their communication skills and interpersonal skills need fundamental development at tertiary level. Consequently, through feedback training our aim is to help them develop their people's skills, to enable them to apply feedback constructively and find received feedback useful.

Feedback skills training is important at two levels professionally. We aim at preparing both the trainees and their school-based mentors to assist their learners/trainees with the help of feedback and thus increase the efficiency of their jobs as teachers and educators. As a result, multi-focussed feedback should become part of their assessment practice and those didactic theories and considerations should be implemented in their everyday teaching. Experiential learning is a key factor in this process as during their training they can get first-hand experience about the power of effective feedback in a looped-way.

Reflective thinking, reflective practice and self-reflections are tools for continuous professional development and 'self-supervision'. Since reflection is assisted by and through feedback, one of our teacher training objectives is to prepare trainees for their autonomous professional development through raising their awareness and understanding about the importance of giving and receiving feedback. Growing professionally on the basis of feedback further enhances the developmental effects of self-reflection and self-analysis while subjective standpoints are tintured by feedback from outside. Developing a healthy professional attitude in these terms is crucial for Hungarian teachers as most practising professionals have a rather negative attitude towards external examination and teacher assessment. What is more, the practice of mutual classroom visits and giving-receiving feedback among colleagues for professional developmental purposes is still not part of their work culture. Based on considering the related skills, knowledge and attitudes our aims concerning the development of feedback skills are as follows. The trainee is to:

- ❖ understand the role and value of feedback in the process of self-development
- ❖ be aware of the definition of feedback and relate to it based on their personal experience
- ❖ be familiar with different feedback techniques, methods and forms of communication
- ❖ be able to receive feedback, accept or refuse certain elements of it
- ❖ be able to give multi-focussed, non-judgemental, personal feedback
- ❖ be able to integrate elements of feedback into their future professional activity.

How to give and receive feedback?

The literature on feedback is diverse and several areas of science are represented. Psychology, organizational development, human resources management, coaching and supervision are concerned, just to name a few. In other words, all those areas which aim at analysing and improving cooperation, collaboration among people. Our approach in teacher education to feedback is closest to that of supervision, aiming at enabling the trainees to have a more realistic view of themselves, their activities, to be able to analyse and change any undesirable effects, to become aware of the positive aspects and further enhance them. The basic preconditions of this so called personal learning and development (or rather self-reflection) are mutual interest, trust and confidence.

Effective feedback can also be defined if differentiated from other interactions among people which have other aims and take other forms. Thus, feedback is not analysis, not an experiment to change the other person, not judgement, not firing back, not putting pressure on somebody, not about giving instruction, not humiliation or preaching. Feedback is a two-way process, where the giver needs to pack the message into a form which is enabling the receiver to listen to it and process it.

Analysing the question of how to give feedback, the first and foremost issue is phrasing it using the first person singular. Using I-statements (a term used by Thomas Gordon) when giving feedback can avoid being judgemental, which may result in unwanted negative reactions from the receiver: self-defence, negation or keeping aloof. Instead, using I-statements can help us to be clear and factual. When giving feedback, we report about the *behaviour* of the feedback recipient. If we can phrase it as an I-statement in first person singular, then our feedback is about the feedback provider's observations and interpretations of that behaviour, or the effect of that behaviour on the feedback giver. In this way the content of feedback can be interpreted and accepted more easily. Another feedback technique is the so called 'sandwich'. In this model in order to support the recipient to keep their self esteem and accept any criticism, a constructive suggestion or idea for improvement is packed between two positive aspects.

In addition to all the above-mentioned techniques, the practice of effective feedback is largely dependent on the prevalent atmosphere and the quality of relationship between the feedback provider and the recipient. Therefore, being teacher educators, we should aim at more than just if we were lecturers: establishing an atmosphere and of openness and acceptance while getting to know our trainees is of primary importance. Only in such conditions can we earn credibility and ensure the hands-on practice of giving and receiving effective feedback. Furthermore, useful feedback given to trainees and expected from them should be positive and constructive in nature. The content of feedback is constructive only if it inspires, encourages but does not close down (it is not judgemental). It should show directions, open windows or pave the way for development. Good feedback does not say it all, it is selective, where focus and priorities are very important criteria for selection. Moreover, useful feedback focuses

on the observed behaviour, a teacher's role and refers to a particular lesson or activity. However, categorising behaviour and using generalizations should be avoided. Awareness, honesty and credibility are values of special importance when giving feedback in the capacity of being a teacher educator (Richards & Nunan, 1990; Boud, 1991).

In sum, giving useful feedback is not an inborn quality or a personal trait but a skill, which can certainly be trained and developed observing some rules and regulations. Thus, what follows is a brief discussion of our practice of training and developing feedback skills pursued in the programme of teacher education at Károli University in Budapest, Hungary.

Some good practice of developing feedback skills in the Centre for Teacher Education at Károli University

Below we shall introduce and discuss those elements in our practice of teacher education at the Centre for Teacher Training of Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church (KRE-CETT) that focus on developing feedback skills and thus support the development of reflective competence. Our aim is to share best practice and present how the principled application of training feedback skills enhances the contemporary reflective practice of teacher education within our institution.

Changing Perspectives in a Personal way

According to our trainees, the Centre of Teacher Training is characterized by an atmosphere of acceptance and support. On the one hand this is perhaps due to the Christian spirituality and values of the university but on the other hand the personal beliefs and attitudes of the trainers and the staff in general is a major factor. Our staff consists of 10-12 full time lecturers, who are members of either the Pedagogy-Psychology Departmental Group or the Methodology Team. There are about 40-70 trainees in a year which enables the establishment of a more personal relationship and atmosphere of professional support throughout their training career at our university from the very beginning till the final examinations. One trainer is responsible for several subjects and courses in different semesters and years and thus meet all the trainees at various stages of their training career. In this way their stages of development can be easily identified and best supported by formative feedback (Fischer & Majzikné, 2017).

Teaching feedback skills in our understanding is not about teaching various feedback techniques and practising them. Instead, our aim is to establish a training context, a work culture where trainees can not only understand but also get first-hand experience about giving and receiving feedback. As a result of their continuous, experiential learning they become more aware of the real supportive value of feedback and apply it for their personal-professional development and growth. This kind of practice is certainly time consuming and only effective if recurrent and

cyclically present throughout the training programme since it involves encouraging a reflective practice of not just receiving feedback but also giving effective feedback to peers. Unity and shared values among the staff of trainers further enhances the effectiveness and credibility of these training objectives.

Giving face to face feedback in seminars

Our trainees receive feedback on their work and achievement at regular intervals throughout their training, mostly at the end of each semester. When their reflective written assignments in the subjects of Psychology and Pedagogy are returned, summative written feedback is always integrated with formative elements. They are expected to prepare a written self-evaluation and a course evaluation along some criteria in advance. During the last seminar these are discussed in person where the focus is on personal-professional development: their strengths and achievement is talked over briefly one by one, face to face with the trainer who has also prepared in advance for that session with making notes. We consider this personal, oral feedback dialogue very important as it is a unique opportunity for the trainee to ask questions and clarify uncertainties. At the same time, it provides a chance for the trainer to see how trainees receive feedback. After several years of training experience, based on our trainees' informal feedback, these very short but personal feedback sessions are most valued as they are encouraging, providing guidance and food for thought. Most importantly, these instances seem to help trainees come over difficulties experienced throughout their training career, support their perseverance, solve problems and keep them motivated.

Microteaching sessions: first encounters with peer-feedback

The introductory Methodology seminars in the third year of training include so called microteaching sessions, during which the trainees get a first chance to try their wings, plan and teach a short 5-10 min. session in front of their peers with guidance in a supportive climate. These occasions provide a unique first opportunity to learn about how to give and receive feedback to and from peers. First the trainee who did the microteaching session speaks and says briefly how it felt, how it went or if there is anything they would do differently (self-reflection). Then the peers are encouraged to use positive I-statements (I liked the way...) and later start giving suggestions using the sandwich technique (One suggestion...Maybe next time...etc.) and finish off with a positive note. Oral feedback is then incorporated into a short written one to help self-evaluation, reflection and action planning.

School placement: feedback from various sources

During school placement trainees first work in pairs or small groups under the guidance of a school-based mentor. They carry out classroom observation first and later observe each other while they start classroom teaching out in the practice schools. During the post-lesson discussions there are ample opportunities to practise giving and receiving feedback in an effective and useful way. Self-reflection on feelings and experience is supported by a list of questions referring to how the trainee felt, how the pupils felt during the lesson. What follows is the reflection on having achieved aims and objectives and their strengths, weaknesses (or rather areas for development). The self-reflection template concludes with incorporating the mentor feedback and peer feedback for action planning. During the long-term individual school placement in the final year the same feedback practice is followed under close mentoring and thus it becomes an integral part of professional practice by the time of graduation.

Mentor training: feedback as priority

Process-based reflective teacher training is the basic approach also used during mentor training at our university. In the framework of in-service mentor courses, facilitating self-reflection and experiential learning takes priority. In addition to the traditional, mostly theoretical courses the second half of the training course curriculum focuses on practical courses: Mentor roles, Mentor Communication, Assessment in Mentoring, just to mention a few examples. Those experienced teacher colleagues who have been teaching for decades need to go through a change of attitude and shift of perspectives in order to become a mentor.

Therefore, active listening, the nature of feedback, giving and receiving feedback or what makes feedback useful are central elements of the course. Again, situational role plays, and video-based simulations are used to give participants hands-on experience in observation, pre- and post- lesson discussions. Very often trainees doing their school placement are invited to share their experience about formative evaluation, the importance of non-judgemental feedback for development. The different types of mentor guidance (direct, indirect, alternative, collaborative style) and helpful questioning practice are also discussed.

Feedback and Reflection: concluding thoughts

Hungary, among other Central-European countries, seems to lack a feedback culture, let alone a positive one. It is not our duty to discover the historic or other reasons behind this phenomenon, however it is our responsibility to try and change those negative tendencies perhaps through pre-service and in-service teacher education. Feedback skills are life skills and should ideally be developed from an early age in the family context and throughout public education before students enter higher education and teacher training. Very often we meet initial resistance on behalf of our

trainees for whom the whole concept of reflective thinking and the use of feedback are completely alien. Thus, there is an expressed need for establishing a more positive feedback culture nation-wide which probably requires a large-scale attitudinal change and shift of perception. However, starting small, within the framework of training courses seems to be a challenging but promisingly fruitful mission.

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